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> The half-life of Not Getting the Point is forever.
>
> —Loudon Wainwright, "The Strange Case of Strangelove"

In the musical *My Fair Lady*, Professor Henry Higgins sings, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" Frustrated because he is in love with a woman whose inner life he finds exasperating, he recites a litany of characteristics that he believes make men easier to deal with. The song ends with Higgins exposing his projective egocentric view: "Why can't a woman be like me?" We humans have a similar tendency when it comes to organizations: Why can't organizations, we often seem to be asking, be more like us?

Organizations are, after all, everywhere. We know we cannot live without them. We admire their ability to amplify our capacities. We derive our identities from the organizations we work for and the organizations from which we obtain various credentials and those that accept us as dues-paying members. The institution of the corporation gives them legal status as persons. They walk among us, we know them by name, we have relationships with them, and they are among the most consequential actors in most of our lives.[1] It is little surprise that we personify and anthropomorphize organizations and think about them as if they were just like us, human. But they are not.

[1] The sociologist Charles Perrow argued in the early 1990s that organizations had, in effect, "absorbed" much of society. Charles Perrow, "A Society of Organizations," *Theory and Society* 20, no. 6 (1991): 725–762.

The Difficulty of Thinking Organizationally

Barbara Czarniawska has written that the stories we tell about organizations tend toward one of two extremes: they either are told by economists and remain "general, abstract, and hypothetical" or consist of "glossy (and glossing) annual reports, or stories of villains and heroes."[2] At both extremes organizations are familiar to us euphemistically; we tell such highly formalized stories about them that "the most pervasive social phenomenon of contemporary Western societies remains unknown, glossed over, revealed in snatches, or disguised as something else: a romance, a spy story."[3] Whether it is due to their ubiquity or inscrutability, our thinking about organizations is clouded by taken-for-granted abstractions.

Over the course of several years of fieldwork with Fighting Back we observed innumerable variations on this theme. About half the time we heard platitudes about pooling resources, reaching consensus, building systems, and becoming more efficient and the exhortations of boosters and inspiring anecdotal accounts of small successes. Sometimes it seemed that people really believed something like "All that's required is for all the stakeholder organizations to come to the table." The other half of the time we heard explanations that featured scofflaw organizations, community pathologies, clueless funders, politics, incompetence, and corruption. Almost everyone we talked to, it seemed, took for granted that Fighting Back's plan to organize the organizations should simply work; every challenge that emerged had to be explained by a personal or organizational scapegoat. A few folks were skeptical of the entire enterprise, but no one ever spoke of why the task might be fundamentally challenging in the first place beyond the idea that substance abuse is a hard problem. The worldviews of both New Haveners and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation seemed to presume that a normal community of organizations, if it really wanted to solve its problems, if it were given ample resources, time, and technical assistance, could just do it. They appreciated that it would not be easy to get it right, but no one seemed to understand why an endeavor like this might be difficult even if everything did go right.

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[2] Barbara Czarniawska, *Narrating the Organization: Dramas of Institutional Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.

[3] Ibid.

Learning from the Fighting Back Experience

The motivation behind this book was to fill the gap between naïve optimism and cynical pessimism. In the meetings I attended, the interviews I conducted, and the hundreds of hours of ethnographic hanging around I did, I was continually struck by what seemed to me to be distorted interpretations of what was happening—the characterization of things as pathological that I saw as organizationally normal. As I thought about the conversations I was hearing and participating in, I realized that neither a course in the sociology of organizations nor a consultant's report on organizational best practices would be helpful. What was needed was to retell the story of Fighting Back as seen through an organizational lens.

The book, then, is neither about New Haven per se nor the war on drugs in the 1990s. It is not about the cyclical rise and fall of enthusiasm for coalitions and collaboratives, and it is not an attempt to compare those strategies to other ways of intervening in the life of a community. The goal, instead, is to show how the structural properties of the object of such interventions and the arena where they take place—organizations and communities of organizations—can dominate the outcomes they yield. The conclusions outlined here are drawn from an interpretation of how events unfolded in just one case, but my hope is that they contain at least some insights that can inform our understanding of interorganizational cooperation, collaboration, and coalitions in other contexts.

In this case study, my strategy has been to compare the theory or expectations of program planners, funders, and experts with field observations and local participants' interpretations and explanations. The underlying analytical protocol was to start by comparing what was supposed to happen with what did happen using our field observations, participants' accounts, and documentary evidence. Then I consider participants' explanations—often expressed in terms of who or what was to blame for problems—individuals, organizations, or the entire community. Finally, using ideas borrowed mostly from organizational theory, I suggest generic organizational explanations as alternatives to both participant and expert explanations for the obstacles encountered by the program.

As noted in Chapter 1, this project began as one component of a straightforward evaluation study: Did Fighting Back work to reduce

demand for alcohol and other drugs? My job was to characterize how Fighting Back was implemented in New Haven so that we could compare this site to others. Was the mix of strategies here the same as in other locations? How did this community tailor to local conditions the available repertoire of demand reduction strategies? What techniques of deploying outside funding and technical assistance that were useful in leveraging local resources and generating public awareness might be applied in other communities? What lessons could be learned from this experiment?

Who was this evaluation for? The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation was paying for it, and ultimately the foundation's board of directors was the client; they wanted to know if this program had turned out to be a good investment. But we implicitly understood our brief more generally to be to assess what could be learned from Fighting Back. Personally, I wanted to write a report that might be useful to the people I had worked alongside and gotten to know during the 1990s in New Haven. People who welcomed me as a participating observer, who relied on me for my expertise in data mapping and organizing, and computer technology and research methods and who would occasionally turn to me and say, "You're the sociologist; can you explain what's going on here? What can sociology tell us about this?" And I asked myself the same thing. What insights could we offer that might be useful to the people who pour their lives into making their community a better place working in programs like Fighting Back? It would not do to conclude simply that it did not work; decide that it was too little, too late; or wish that the program had been bigger.

This research strategy emerged during the fieldwork: participants, funders, and researchers all talked in matter-of-fact terms that implied they were undertaking a fundamentally straightforward task. They talked about the community, the coalition, partner organizations, the system, the continuum of care, and collaboration—the very things that I was struggling to understand and that were at the center of the Fighting Back idea—as if they were the most obvious and well understood concepts around. But no matter how much I listened or how many questions I asked, I could never get a simple explanation of any of them. The funder wanted a coalition; New Haven would build a coalition. No one asked what a coalition was or whether good meetings made good neighbors. Novel institutions like a community-wide coalition, a citizens' task force, and comprehensive system of prevention and

treatment were spoken of as if they were off-the-shelf forms of social organization like chambers of commerce or rotary clubs. And then, when they were doing exactly what they were supposed to do (or at least calling what they were doing by the right names), almost everything that could go wrong did go wrong. Still, no one focused on what seemed to me the most important issue, why this was so difficult, asking instead, "Who screwed up?" This case study is an attempt to come up with a sociological and organizational answer to the former question that goes beyond incompetent communities full of villains, traitors, and rogues.

The main conclusions of this study are that the difficulties encountered in the attempt to implement the Fighting Back idea in New Haven can be explained as the result of three failures: the failure to appreciate the implications of being an organizational intervention; the failure to anticipate the limits of collaborations and coalitions imposed by the units being organizations; and the failure to understand how the history of organizational activity accumulates as social organizational debris in communities of organizations and how this affects endeavors like Fighting Back.

With so many "failures" in the previous paragraph the reader may be surprised that this conclusion does not definitively say that the program was a failure. New Haven Fighting Back did not, it is true, measurably reduce substance abuse in the city. But as the book documents, despite all the difficulties the program faced, it found its feet and was run with a political adroitness that allowed it to have a lasting effect on how things were done at the neighborhood level, in and around city hall, and among the organizations whose work comes under the general category of community improvement. Even if they did not manage to build the system that appeared in the diagrams in their proposals, the presence of the program yielded changes in the system of organizations in New Haven. The program, as originally articulated, was seemingly oblivious of the organizational junkyard that was to be the source of many early obstacles, but over time, Barbara Geller and her colleagues were able to appreciate this very normal aspect of communities of organizations and use what I have called organizational detritus to advantage. So, too, they came to use attenuated versions of concepts like collaboration and coalition, focusing on what was practical and doable.

The foundation had written at the outset that it was motivated by the idea that communities knew best what would work in their own

particular context, and the New Haven experience eventually bore this out. But are there lessons learned along they way that might apply across communities? Did the experiment yield insights about community-level interventions that involve collaborations, cooperatives, and coalitions? I think it did, and I offer some below in the form of eight claims.

Claim 1: The Arena Is a Community of Organizations

For the purpose of understanding initiatives like Fighting Back, a community is a community of organizations, not individuals. A tendency to focus on persons and romanticize them in the aggregate obscures and distorts an on-the-ground reality in which the players are organizations. Interorganizational collaboration is too easily thought of as being a matter of everyone getting along, and friction between organizations is interpreted as pathology and politics: things would have worked fine if so-and-so (or such-and-such an organization) had not been so selfish. Overcoming problems is seen as a matter of improving individual or organizational behavior.

After the letter-writing incident, for example, the national program office advised New Haven players to sit down and work out their differences, but they wondered to themselves whether there was enough political goodwill in New Haven to make the program successful. Their advice assumed that the disagreements were personal rather than organizational, and their concern located the problem in the collective psyche of the community. Both are fundamentally personifications of organizational collectivities or reductions of organizations down to particular representatives.

To understand what happens in communities of organizations, we need to remember that organizations are not just like persons, that collectivities made up of organizations do not behave analogously to a group of individuals, and that organizational representatives at the table can, effectively, be more organization than person.

Thinking about a community of organizations rather than a community of people frees us to look for more fundamental explanations for success or failure. We can ask whether an intervention in a community of organizations, on organizations by organizations, has a default expectation of success in the first place. We can avoid the logic that said Fighting Back would succeed as long as no one played the rogue

or saboteur and as long as the people were ready, attitudinally, to take substance abuse seriously. We can escape the bias of treating organizational collaboration and cooperation as if they were natural behavior for healthy and properly socialized organizations.

Claim 2: Organizational Interaction Is Hard

An implicit assumption of the collaboration paradigm is that organizations can interact with one another benignly or at least with negligible transaction costs. Traditionally, this question is evaluated in terms of interests—participation is made worth an organization's while by horse trades and favor exchanges, but mere contact can threaten secrets, require adjustments in standard operating procedures, expose an organization's inefficiencies, or catch it out for symbolic stances taken in the past. Differences in size, professional orientation, sector, or level of sophistication can generate unanticipated consequences that can inhibit collaboration or generate unanticipated problems. These organizational differences can make interactions nonbenign regardless of levels of trust, community spirit, collective benefit, or good personal relations among the individuals involved. An organization's inclination not to collaborate can be a realistic assessment of potential negative repercussions rather than a lack of community spirit or inability to get along well with others.

Claim 3: Organizations Live in Different Worlds

One of the most frequently heard phrases during the planning and implementation of Fighting Back was "We all live in the same city." It was intoned to explain why success was both necessary and inevitable. The phrase implied that since we all live in the same city, we all want the same thing, and thus we will be able to work together for the good of the community. Indeed, the presumption of the motivational efficacy of shared reality and shared fate lie at the core of community initiatives. That syllogism may or may not be flawed, but the premise is likely false: in very real ways, even organizations that are geographic neighbors do not actually live in the same community.

By their very design, organizations are specialty sighted, seeing only the features in the community that are directly related to their mission. Treatment organizations know where the addicts are, the

police know where crimes happen, the fire department listens for alarms in a community of flammable structures, and homelessness agencies exist in a world mapped by the places in which the homeless congregate. Each organization, when it considers how things are and what must be done, is looking at a different set of data and is motivated by different measurable outcomes; each looks out at the community through a different professionally sanctioned lens. By virtue of what organizations are, a community of organizations is a collection of entities that do not all live in the same world at all.

Claim 4: Organizations Are Highly Constrained Actors

Each organizational representative around the Fighting Back table was celebrated for the vast quantities of resources she or he represented. The hospital and the phone company and the university were in the room and on the team. But the disappointing reality was that, as members of collaborations and coalitions, these individuals often have extremely limited discretion to contribute to the cause.

Alongside the promise of economies of scale, efficiency, and complementarity, what makes collaboration seductive is the sheer sum of all the organizational resources that appear to be at the table. Imaginations are stirred by thoughts of what could be done together, and the case for community collaboration rests partly on the idea that potential collaborators have so much to contribute. In New Haven, it is fair to say, if all the resources of all the organizations around the table were marshaled against substance abuse, the problem would have been chased out of town in no time, but though Fighting Back might have counted these organizational resources as pledged, in reality the kinds and amounts of what organizations (and their personal representatives) could offer were constrained by their organizational commitments, funding sources, and legal regulations. The result can range from a whole that is simply less than the sum of its parts to out and out conflict when organizations reveal how they are not free to contribute to the collective effort.

Claim 5: Organizations Are Highly Distracted Actors

Collaborative multi-organization solutions are always in direct competition with what responsible organizations are supposed to be doing anyway. In short, organizations tend to be very distracted actors.

Much thinking about collaboration assumes that the heavy lifting lies in persuading community entities to sign on, but this turns out to be the easy part. Most organizations in a community of organizations operate at or near capacity just to stay in existence. It is not uncommon for organizations, when called on to join a new initiative, to attend a few meetings and make a quick assessment about whether the project represents potential resources and then, if nothing happens, retreat to business as usual, maintaining only a symbolic participation. And even while present, a significant fraction of an organization's attention will be elsewhere. Initiatives like Fighting Back often remain, in effect, in denial about this; collaborations designed to be built out of distracted actors would stand better chances of achieving their goals.

Claim 6: Collaboration Amplifies Organizational Irrationality

The foundation's exhortation for Fighting Back sites to include all manner of institutions, organizations, and public and private agencies in the initiative is what made it different from previous programs. The advice reflected the public health strategy of turning an individual problem into a community problem as well as the belief that the combined resources of the entire community would be a formidable force. The entity created by getting everyone to the table, however, often proved unwieldy, directionless, and ineffective. It suffered from a diversity of goals, a tendency to be overwhelmed by possible courses of action, and a chaotic calendar.

There are, to be sure, many reasons to involve as many stakeholders as possible, not least the goals of maximizing information inputs and political viability. When seen from an organizational perspective, though, we recognize that a heightened level of garbage-can-ness is a persistent tradeoff that comes with broad participation. Normal, everyday intraorganizational irrationalities can aggregate, combine, and amplify through interorganizational connections. Many solutions are unlikely to be found unless a diverse set of participants is involved; many solutions are unlikely to be implemented if a diverse set of organizational participants is involved. The answer is not to eschew interorganizational collaboration but to come at it with open eyes and to appreciate it as a means to an end, not an end in itself, to recognize that the returns to broad participation decrease with the number

of organizational participants, and to remember that targeted, task-specific collaborations are often more effective than community-wide assemblages.

Claim 7: Collaboration and Coalitions Are Ambiguous Technologies

No matter how easily it rolls off the tongue, collaboration is not a part of the standard repertoire in most organizations. Organizations need to learn how to initiate it, how to keep doing it, and how to recognize whether it is happening. The people who designed Fighting Back knew that it would be difficult for communities to implement because it was something that had not been done before, but no one seemed really to focus on the technology itself. Everyone spoke of collaboration and coordination, but few, it seems, had any idea of how to actually build a system out of neighborhood groups, treatment providers, hospitals, business, politicians, academic researchers, and churches. Coordination, collaboration, and coalitions among organizations are ambiguous social technologies: we do not really know what they are, when to use them, how they work, or why they fail.

Genuine collaboration and coordination are difficult to achieve when the actors are persons; among organizations the calculus is more complicated still. A sort of cult of collaboration can blind participants to important characteristics of these social organizational technologies: They are nonstandard institutional forms. Their symbolic value may far exceed their real effects. They are difficult to detect and measure. And, in the long run, it may well be that everyone does not need to work together and that real changes come about through limited bursts of highly targeted cooperation, coordination, and collaboration among small groups of partners.

There is no denying that there are tangible benefits from actual cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. As system-building technologies, though, they are fraught with difficulty, and how to use them to bring about a system change is never as obvious as it appears.

Claim 8: Urban Communities Are Social Organizational Junkyards

Organization does not disappear when organizations die but accumulates in a community of organization in forms that can both promote and interfere with subsequent organizational efforts.

America's inner cities have long been called urban laboratories by both well-meaning scholars and policy makers and critics of the kinds of programs that have been carried out over the last half century or so. One element of the laboratory metaphor that has not been explored is the degree to which we tend to treat communities as mere objects of intervention on which a new technique can be tried and its results measured after which the community is left as it was or perhaps marginally improved in wait of the next intervention. Most programs involve the creation of new organizations and new organizational relationships, much of which will not disappear when the programs close up shop and go away.

The organizational junk left behind by successive generations of programs takes many forms, from simple things like a name, post-office box, or 501(c)(3) registration to defunct boards, dormant neighborhood organizations, networks of former activists, or institutionalized patterns of conflict. Organizational junk can be employed by skilled activists and organizers or it can give rise to unexpected resistance when new programs are initiated. The social space of urban communities is lumpy and full of social organizational stuff both inside organizations and in the spaces between them. We can now answer a question posed earlier in the book: an organizational junkyard is the kind of thing a community is in which to carry out a program like Fighting Back.

Conclusion

The community development field can be a surprisingly divided one. Community organizers from different schools of thought rarely see eye to eye and readily castigate one another's approaches. Animosity is common between street-level organizers and those who work for large philanthropic organizations. This study makes no attempt to weigh in on these arguments (indeed I have no data for doing so), but if my observations and interpretations ring true, then perhaps the partisans in those debates, all individuals who work hard to make cities better for people, will have a small measure of improved appreciation for the kind of thing that community is as the object or arena on or in which they labor.

To paraphrase Max Weber,[4] it is, of course, not my intention to argue for a one-sided organizational explanation for everything that

[4] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930): 183.

happens when we try to improve life in urban communities. Rather, I have tried to draw attention to omnipresent effects that our predilection to think in terms of individuals makes it easy to overlook. In the real world, practitioners rarely have the advantage of comparison cases and before-and-after tests. There is a tendency to explain what goes wrong in a particular case by comparing it to an ideal (often fantastical) case (in which everything works out just fine) in search of some characteristic that will explain why the reality fell short of the ideal. My counsel is that we revise the ideal. This is what I mean by generic organizational effects: certain effects arise because interventions like Fighting Back are organizational interventions. When we try to do things with organizations in communities of organizations, things almost never work out fine at all. And when they do not we should look to these organizational effects before we resort to other explanations.

Am I arguing that coalitions are impossible and that the goal of all getting along is not worth pursuing? That idealistic talk in our communities is out of order? No. A simple-minded, hard-headed realism is not intended. To get programs off the ground, secure funding, get individuals and organizational representatives to pay attention, hyperbole may well be necessary. In many cases, the first step can be taken only when an impossible task is portrayed as doable and achievable.[5] And even when they are simply not the right tool for the job, efforts aimed at community-wide cooperation, coordination, and collaboration can have salutary indirect effects that a community values; sometimes any program is better than no program.

The problems that professionals and activists like those who undertook Fighting Back tackle are truly daunting and the stakes are high for real people. Anyone who gets close enough to such problems to have a hope of understanding them would probably have to be mad to undertake doing anything about them. But we do. And the tools we deploy are invariably organizational. The better we understand our tools, the more likely our efforts will yield benefits. What the community of organizations and organizational junkyard perspectives offer is a small contribution toward becoming more familiar with our tools.

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[5] Lee Clarke, *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).